

Testimony for Public Hearing
Appropriations Committee
February 23, 2017

Mark Jenkins, Founder / Executive Director
Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition, Inc.
1229 Albany Avenue, Hartford CT 06112

Testimony **IN OPPOSITION** of “moving 21 detox beds from Hartford to Middletown” as referenced in the DMHAS section of the Governor’s Proposed FY 2018-2019 Budget.

Good evening, Appropriations Committee Members. My name is Mark Jenkins; I am the Executive Director of the Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition, Inc. I have been providing direct services to our most vulnerable substance using population on the street for over 19 years. As a worker on the front lines and former Drug Treatment Advocate, I have experienced, first-hand for many years, the factors that enable or constrain the likelihood that an individual seeking services for substance use disorders will be successful in their quest. I can assure you that moving these beds from Blue Hills Substance Abuse Services (BHSAS) in Hartford to Merritt Hall in Middletown will result in unnecessary suffering and in many cases death for the very people I have been serving.

The Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition (GHHRC) is dedicated to promoting the dignity and wellbeing of individuals and communities impacted by drug use. GHHRC holds that every individual deserves a participatory voice in the public dialogue regarding drug use policies, programs and practices. Through advocacy, training and service, GHHRC aims to ensure the availability, adequacy, accessibility and acceptability of services and resources that remediate the adverse consequences of drug use.

The United States is in the midst of an opioid epidemic. The use of opioids, both prescription and illicit, has resulted in fatal overdoses reaching all-time highs. In 2015 the CDC reported some 47,055 people died nationwide as a result of fatal overdose. In the State of Connecticut the leading cause of accidental death is fatal overdose, and depending on whose numbers you read there were between 680 and 723 deaths as a result of fatal overdose. Hartford has had the dubious distinction of leading this great state in accidental fatal overdose for no less than the last five years, and the number of deaths continues to rise, and outpace deaths from gun violence and drunk driving by more than 2 to 1. Hartford also leads the State by far with the largest number of DMHAS clients by town seeking treatment for both mental health and substance abuse services.

The Governor has solicited the assistance of some of the most knowledgeable individuals in our state and country to develop a response to this epidemic. The “Connecticut Opioid REsponse” or “CORE Initiative” is the brainchild of this effort. Among the 6 primary recommendations provided in this report, emphasis is given to “Increase Access to Treatment”. The Governor also reinstated the Alcohol and Drug Policy Council (ADPC), which works in concert with a wide group of people from State and Community Based Agencies, primarily to examine present services and to establish cost effective strategies and

best practices, to better utilize existing resources and better serve the populations affected by this epidemic. Once again emphasis was placed on "Increase Access to Treatment" in ADPC's Recommendations.

The Governor's Budget proposes to "move" 21 detox beds from BHSAS in Hartford to Merritt Hall in Middletown. The words "Move" and "Relocate" translate to "LOSE" no matter the details. Not to mention that over a two-year period from February 2015 to February 2017, BHSAS provided detoxification services to 2,646 individuals; while Merritt Hall only provided detoxification services to 2,313 individuals, using the same number of detox beds (21). According to DMHAS, there are presently 9,278 clients in Hartford alone that have mental health or substance abuse or combined MH&SA disorders and if you include the immediate neighboring towns of Manchester, East Hartford, West Hartford and New Britain which is second only to Hartford in use of BHSAS beds, raises the number of individuals accessing these services to 18,768.

This "Move" will only produce negative health consequences within an already marginalized population. BHSAS is the only facility in the region that will accept individuals that present without insurance, another major barrier preventing individuals from accessing substance abuse services. BHSAS is the only licensed facility to prescribe Methadone and facilitate a warm hand-off to Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) programs; which is not only a CORE Initiative and ADPC recommendation, but a nationally recognized best practice for individuals experiencing Opioid Use Disorder (OUD).

At a time when citizens are at their most vulnerable, how can access to the very services that would save their lives be cut? When the most marginalized of individuals make the desired decision for positive change; *there will be no light at the end of the tunnel*. You would have to understand what goes through an individual's mind when he/she feels everything has gone wrong in life for them up to that point; even illicit drugs no longer provide a reprieve. "**A decision is going to be made,**" for many it will be a life or death decision. For many, walk-up access is the only way they will seek help. If this option for access to care is removed it will produce negative consequences, in Hartford and the surrounding towns that BHSAS serves. Please do not allow this proposed action.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Jenkins', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Mark Jenkins
Founder / Executive Director
MarkJ@ghhrc.org
860.250.4146

Website <http://ghhrc.org>
FaceBook <https://www.facebook.com/GHHRC>
Twitter <https://twitter.com/GHHRC>